

## **Lesson Plan**

### **The Black Church in Kentucky**

#### Objective:

Students will learn about the role of the black church by reading excerpts from Oral History interviews in the Black Church project from the late 1970's and will prepare to do their own interview focusing on the role of religion in their own community.

#### Kentucky Academic Expectations:

Historical perspective: examine the impact of significant individuals and groups  
Culture and society: explore how people and cultures of many countries, races, and religious traditions have contributed to the American experience.

#### Context:

This lesson could be used when teaching about the civil rights movement or more generally about the role of African-Americans in nineteenth and twentieth century U.S. history or as an introduction to a classroom oral history project.

#### Materials:

Excerpts from interviews from Black Church Oral History Project in Special Collections at the University of Kentucky. Two copies of handouts 1 (Bottoms interview) and 2 (Bell interview) to be used as role plays.

For the teacher, the two-volume *History of Blacks in Kentucky* (Volume I by Marion B. Lucas and Volume II by George C. Wright, The Kentucky Historical Society, 1992) is an important resource. There is also a chapter entitled "Black Christianity" in John C. Boles' *Religion in Antebellum Kentucky*, The University of Kentucky Press, 1976.

#### Procedure:

##### Opening Activity:

Show the excerpt from the movie "The Long Walk Home" which starts with Martin Luther King Jr.'s voice as African-Americans in Montgomery are standing outside the church, then short segment about the bus boycott and back to a church service. This will introduce the role of the black church in the civil rights movement.

##### Transition:

You all know the role of Martin Luther King Jr. in the civil rights movement. Black churches have played an important role in history. We will learn particularly about that role in Kentucky by listening to excerpts from interviews of two black ministers in Louisville, done in 1979 as part of the Black Church Oral History Project.

A little history first. From earliest settlement in Kentucky blacks and whites worshipped in the same churches, but blacks saw the white church as preaching without practicing equality and so sought their own ministers and separate churches. For example, the Second Colored Baptist Church of Louisville, renamed the Green Street Baptist Church in 1860, began as a mission of the white First Baptist Church in 1839. We know something about that church's more recent history from an interview with The Rev. J. W. Bottoms. What can you learn from hearing portions of this interview? about the minister and the church and its role in the community? about how an oral history interview is done?

### Role Plays:

Ask two students ahead of time or on the spot to role play Owens and Bottoms and read from the transcripts (Handout 1). Ask students what they learned about the Rev. Bottoms and about the role of the church in the community. Then ask two other students to role play Owens and Bell and read from that transcript (Handout 2). Again ask students what they learned about the Rev. Bell and about the role of the church. Be sure students know what the NAACP is, that they understand evolution of words: negro, black, African-American.

Teacher can clarify the role of the church in the post-Civil War nineteenth and twentieth centuries by reading from Marion B. Lucas and from George C. Wright in the two volume *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, or by summarizing what they said, or two students could be asked to read the two paragraphs. Ask

Across Kentucky, the church remained, next to the family, the most important institution in the lives of blacks during the post-war years. Most black members quickly decided to establish separate congregations and though prosperity sometimes eluded them, churches represented for blacks the one sphere of their lives where they successfully controlled their own institutions. Whether as a hiding place during racial aberrations or a meeting place for those agitating for public schools, state-supported social programs, or political rights, churches were the center of black life. With the new opportunities freedom afforded, church leaders took up new causes. Every denomination preferred an educated ministry and most made strides in education, but the Baptists led the way by founding State University (later Simmons). In an effort to solve some of the problems posed the poverty which gripped the black community, churches also expanded their social activities. In doing so, they became more the center of black activity (p 228, Vol. I).

Historically, the churches have rallied together to protest racial discrimination. In the early 1890's blacks in Owensboro, Lexington, and Louisville met in churches in their respective communities to protest the passing of Kentucky's Jim Crow railroad law, and they eventually marshaled their efforts and created a statewide organization comprised largely of religious leaders. From their first protest against streetcar segregation in the 1870's to the open-housing rallies led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr in 1967, black Louisvillians have attended meetings at Broadway Temple African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Plymouth Congregational, and several Baptist churches where they first discussed their problems, decided on a course of action, raised money for the cause, and then proceeded from the churches to begin the work of ending the latest racial indignity. As crucial as the church has been to the black struggle for change in Louisville, it might have been even more significant in smaller towns where it was often the only institution of any strength. Louisville blacks always had a number of black leaders and newspaper editors willing to denounce the establishment and by the 1910's the city had the NAACP, the National Urban League, and the Commission on Interracial Cooperation. Meanwhile, blacks residing in much smaller towns, and especially rural areas, had few options besides turning to the church and its leaders for advice and support to resolve a racial crisis (pp. 36-37, Vol II).

### Assessment:

Remind students what kinds of questions were asked during the interviews. Ask students to work individually or in pairs to write five questions to ask a person in the community, a minister or other religious leader, a layperson involved in a religious organization. Encourage a focus on the role of the church in the history and society of the community in this oral history.

Students will probably need a week or so to do an interview and provide a transcript to the teacher.

Handout I: An unrehearsed interview with Rev. J. V. Bottoms, Green Street Baptist Church for the Black Church in Kentucky Oral History Project. The interview was conducted by Ed Owens in Louisville, Kentucky, December 2, 1978.

Owens: I'm speaking with Reverend J. V. Bottoms, pastor of Green Street Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky. He has pastored here for some 29 years. Reverend Bottoms, could you start us off by giving us some of your personal background?

Bottoms: Well, I'm a native of Versailles, Kentucky and I moved to Louisville in the '20's and married for 53 years and my wife is also from Woodford County and I matriculated at Simmons University. . . old Simmons called Simmons University is now Simmons Bible College and I'm married to Florence, former Florence C. Carter and I having graduated from Simmons University and matriculated at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and I'm the first black to graduate from that school after the school became integrated when the Day Law was declared unconstitutional. That was in 19 and 52 and I have pastored three churches. For five years in Nelson County. . . I'll back up, Spencer County in a place called Camp Branch for five years, and Fairview, Kentucky for 11 ears, I've been here 20 years, this is 29<sup>th</sup> year and also I taught at Simmons Bible College. I served there as a . . . I should say from . . . from the janitor to the vice president or the acting president there. . . and I was able to write the first catalogue at the school that was without one for 18 years. I'm now a part-time teacher there, of course, with my church work here, so the Lord has been very good to me, very kind.

Owens: When was Green Street Church founded?

Bottoms: A hundred and yes, about a 134 years ago.

Owens: Why was it founded?

Bottoms: Oh, this is the second oldest national Baptist Church of black Baptists in Louisville. Really we were founded, you know, in antebellum days. Whites granted us our charter and the first (church) was in Walnut Street Baptist Church acting until the church became organized and part of the building that was in this little brochure that you will be able to (take) home and read.

Owens: In what location was the church founded?

Bottoms: The church was located on Green Street which is now Liberty Street. We do not have a Green Street in Louisville as such and the church moved from Liberty to this site. That was some 30 years ago.

Owens: Who were some of the early founders of Green Street church?

Bottoms: D. Jones, I remember him distinctly and his preaching there. . . by the way, he is known for his preachytism and also he was very much concerned about the civil rights factor. He was a civil rights worker, an advocate even before. . . Martin Luther King would call him a man who was before his times. Well now, have you heard of the Day Law?

Owens: Yes, sir.

Bottoms: Several universities provided opportunities for all the teachers in the state to receive their certificates or diploma for teaching, they could not attend the University of Kentucky, could

not attend the University of Louisville and all of them had to come. . . the teachers throughout the state would come to Simmons University during the summer and upgrade the qualifications of teaching and that's the other in Kentucky was the Simmons University. That really has been a great asset to the cause but there was a (bond) issue launched in our city was for the University of Louisville and Dr. Jones went to the front and said: "We will not pass a "bond" issue that will provide education for other children and my children be neglected." And he is often quoted even today, "that soup is too thin for me to drink and the (bond) issue was defeated and the following year the University of Louisville made provision for municipal college alright to be founded, you see, coming to just under the University of Louisville there and . . . therefor our church is known to stand for these things, for civil rights and for mankind. By the way, you see the picture hanging on the wall there. Dr. Martin Luther King made his last public appearance in Louisville in this church, that picture was taken just two or three months before his assassination and that picture is taken in front of the church. That's Dr. Hargis, preacher on the right. That was on the front of the church there and you see that picture up there. There's three blacks there that finished the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. In our church five members of my church made the march on Washington when Dr. Martin Luther King spoke there, you know, his famous speech that he delivered there. What was the title? I'd been to the mountain of freedom" and five of our members were there and this church is known for its stand and even in doctrine. I'm blessed to inherit that and the Lord blessed us to take a stand for the Baptist principles and civil rights. We don't talk too much but we try to do quite a bit.

Handout 2 An unrehearsed interview with Reverent William Hollis Bell, Calvary Baptist Church for the Black Church in Kentucky Oral History Project. The interview was conducted by Edward Owens in Louisville, Kentucky on December 2, 1978.

Owens: My name is Edward Owens. I am working with Dr. George Wright, a history professor at the University of Kentucky on his oral history project The Black Church in Kentucky. I am speaking with Reverend William Hollis Bell, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky. He has pastored here for some twenty-one years. Reverend Bell, could you start us out by giving us some of your personal background?

Bell: My personal background. I was born in Louisville, Kentucky 1720 West Oak Street in the year of 1908. I attended the public schools and also Central High School of Louisville. In 1928 I married and I moved to Detroit, Michigan. I didn't complete high school in Louisville. I also attended Northwestern High School in Detroit. My purpose for going to Detroit. I wanted to be a mortician, an undertaker. Study mortuary science and the Depression came and that went down the drain. In the meantime I worked at Ford Motor Company and various industrial plants and in the year 1937 I was inspired to preach. After acknowledging my call to my pastor Reverend A. M. Martin of the New Life Baptist Church, I was later given the privilege to preach my trial sermon. . . I might say that education among the black people of America has been sponsored by the church. Our early teachers, our first teachers were ministers, preachers, they used their little church houses to educate our children. Most of our black colleges had their beginning in the black church. They are in dire need today. Since integration and various institutions, state institutions, have dropped the color bar our schools are in dire need to finance to maintain themselves because we believe in separation of church and state. The National Baptist Convention is sponsoring drives now to implement our schools that they be maintained on the highest level on academic study and also religious education. So no institution or no organization sponsors the church. She sponsors herself by the adherence to the gospel and the love of Jesus Christ.

Owens: Is the black minister still the leader in the black community?

Bell: I might give you this insight as to his importance to the black community. As we study history and the development and the achievement of negroes in America they got their inspiration and they also got their courage to venture out into enterprise. It is from the church, the guidance of the black minister that most of our negro institutions have come into being and have been sustained. Most of the outstanding negro insurance companies of America had their beginning from the emphasis of the church. I can recall when I was a little boy here in Louisville when the Domestic Insurance Company was being formed and the Mammoth Insurance Company which was first and also our negro banks. At that time we had two, they went under, but we have another now, The Continental National Bank. And the black church allowed those men to come before their congregations to get support for these institutions. If you read the history of most negro insurance companies in America they got their springboard from the black church and the interest of the black minister. You take today if there is an enterprise that is being sponsored by negroes they always turn to the church to support them. They come before our gatherings, they come before our conventions. They come before our local committees and they ask us for their support even in the field of mortuary science, in the field of restaurants, in the field of garages, in the field of gas stations. I might say without hesitation that the black church is the rallying point of the negroes in any worthy enterprise. For instance, executive secretary of the NAACP was here a few days ago, Reverend Hooks, and he met with the ministerial convention of

Louisville and he said without the Baptist Church. . . without the churches the NAACP could not exist.